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ABSTRACT

Social norming campaigns that work to show the disparity between students' perceptions of campus drinking and actual levels of drinking have proven to be successful in reducing alcohol use by college students. The premise of social norming is that human behavior is greatly influenced by perceptions of the population from which acceptance is desired. When the actual drinking levels of the campus population, which typically are lower than perceived levels, are publicized, students tend to moderate their drinking to fit the actual, rather than the perceived characteristics of the student body. At the University of Mississippi, researchers have been developing a Survey of Alcohol Usage and Perceptions (SAUP) as a practical approach to gathering essential data for a social norming campaign. This paper describes items for the SAUP and provides suggestions for publicizing the measured data. The SAUP, which was deemed face valid by the university's task force on binge and abusive drinking, contains a brief introductory statement followed by 16 questions and 4 demographic items. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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The Survey of Alcohol Usage and Perceptions

Michael K. Ponton and Jason S. Dean

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The Survey of Alcohol Usage and Perceptions

ABSTRACT

The abusive use of alcohol and its related side effects represent an ongoing concern within postsecondary institutions. Fortunately, social norming campaigns that work to show the disparity between students' perceptions of campus drinking and actual levels of drinking have proven successful in reducing alcohol usage. The premise of social norming is that human behavior is greatly influenced by our perceptions of the population from which we desire acceptance. By publicizing the actual drinking levels of the campus population (which typically is lower than perceived levels), students tend to moderate their drinking behavior to fit the actual, and not the perceived, characteristics of the student body.

Social norming campaigns publicize the research results from surveys conducted on a representative sample of the student population. At The University of Mississippi, the *Survey of Alcohol Usage and Perceptions* (SAUP) was developed as a practical approach to gathering essential data for our social norming campaign. Items associated with the SAUP will be presented in this article as well as suggestions for publicizing the measured data, which should be useful to other institutions with an interest in developing a social norming campaign.

KEY WORDS

Social norming, alcohol abuse, instrumentation, survey.

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ABSTRACT

The abusive use of alcohol and its related side effects represent an ongoing concern within postsecondary institutions. Fortunately, social norming campaigns that work to show the disparity between students' perceptions of campus drinking and actual levels of drinking have proven successful in reducing alcohol usage. The premise of social norming is that human behavior is greatly influenced by our perceptions of the population from which we desire acceptance. By publicizing the actual drinking levels of the campus population (which typically is lower than perceived levels), students tend to moderate their drinking behavior to fit the actual, and not the perceived, characteristics of the student body.

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SOCIAL NORMING

Social norming is a misperception correction based approach to alcohol education. The basic premise is that a population's perception of acceptable alcohol drinking levels will influence the permissiveness of drinking in their own behavior. Many studies have shown that there is a common error of opinion in overestimating normative drinking levels. Therefore, should true consumption levels be publicized, it is hypothesized that actual drinking levels will decline.

Perkins and Berkowitz (1986) first proposed the social norming approach to alcohol education and intervention in a study at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Students were given an anonymous survey concerning their perceptions of drinking norms and their actual behavior. The results of the survey revealed an overestimation of normative attitudes towards drinking. Berkowitz and Perkins (1987) suggest that alcohol education resources focus on publicly revealing the true norms as a means to prevention. This recommendation is a significant departure from the traditional approaches of alcohol education to treat abusers that include support for abstinence, responsible drinking messages, and education with regard to negative behavioral consequences. The pervasiveness in misperceptions of drinking levels on college and university campuses has been well replicated (Baer, Stacy & Larimer, 1991; Burrell, 1990), and recent research at The University of Wyoming (Steffian, 1997) indicate that the use of social norming techniques on an experimental group of heavy drinkers significantly decreased

their perceptions of normative behavior particularly when compared to a control group exposed to a thirty-minute traditional alcohol education video describing the physiological effects of alcohol.

Health professionals at Northern Illinois University (NIU) were the first to operationalize the social norming theory in their drug and alcohol prevention efforts (Haines, 1996, 1998). In 1989, the Health Enhancement Services at NIU began to rethink their traditional drug and alcohol education strategies after binge drinking rates continued to remain high on campus. After collecting data, the Health Enhancement Services determined that using the student media to advertise messages such as "Most students (55%) drink less than five drinks during a night out" (Haines, 1996, p. 8) would be the most cost effective vehicle to inform the student population of the correct percentages. After the first year, an 18% reduction in perceived drinking norms at NIU and a 16% reduction in actual binge drinking was measured. By 1995, the campus perception of binge drinking had been reduced to 43% and by 1998 true binge drinking levels decreased a total of 44% from the 1988 figures.

Binge drinking rates at The University of Arizona declined from 43% to 29% after their implementation of a social norming campaign in 1995 (Johannesen, Collins, Mills-Novoa & Glider, 1999). Using an environmental management approach endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education, their efforts focused on the identification and inclusion of key partners or "stakeholders" such as faculty and staff members, residence hall staff, and athletic department personnel. Resources focus on training these stakeholders to recognize and use university policy to enforce the norms among those who are likely to have and perpetuate the misperceptions of campus drinking levels.

SURVEY OF ALCOHOL USAGE AND PERCEPTIONS

Members of The University of Mississippi Task Force on Binge and Abusive Drinking decided in 2000 to begin a social norming campaign. The first step in such a campaign is to develop a procedure for collecting baseline data that represents the drinking characteristics of the local student population. Haines (1996) states "many schools already gather local data with the CORE Survey" (p. 12); however, the CORE Survey also assesses drug usage and contains many items that address issues unrelated to an alcohol-related social norming campaign. Such unrelated items increase the time to complete the survey, which may affect voluntary participation. In addition, the CORE Survey must be purchased and processed by the Core Institute for a fee. Surveys used at other institutions, such as at Northern Illinois University (Haines, 1996) and Harvard University (Wechsler et al., 1998), also assess issues related to student lifestyle (e.g., tobacco usage, sexual activity) thereby increasing the length of the questionnaire. Thus the authors, as members of the Task Force, were charged with developing a practical instrument that focused specifically on potential publicity announcements. Hence, the SAUP was developed.

The development of specific items for the SAUP was based upon the goal of assessing the drinking characteristics of the local student population. Because a characteristic can

be defined as an enduring disposition to engage in a particular activity, items were needed to assess the quantity of alcohol consumed and the temporal consistency of drinking activities. Item pairs were developed to determine not only actual usage, but also perceived usage among the student population—the disparities between the two measures may be used in a social norming announcement. Therefore, SAUP items assess the quantity of weekly alcohol usage, the number of days per week of usage, and the number of days per month that five or more drinks are consumed in a 2-hour period (while researchers such as Wechsler et al. (1998) define "binge" drinking as "the consumption of at least five drinks in a row for men or four drinks in a row for women" (p. 58), the Task Force felt it necessary to add a temporal criterion for binge-type drinking as five or more drinks over a very long time period may not constitute a health risk). Two items were also created to assess the weekly usage of alcohol in high school thereby providing insight into behavioral changes as a result of college attendance.

According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), behavioral intentions are created not only based upon the likelihood of favorable consequences if the behavior is enacted, but also "a social or 'normative' factor" (p. 301) that accounts for "the influence of the social environment on behavior" (p. 302). This normative factor "is the person's perception that most people who are important to him [sic] think he should or should not perform the behavior in question" (p. 302). Thus, items were developed to assess if Ole Miss students believe that the consumption of alcohol is an important part of the college experience and whether it is important that their friends consume alcohol.

The deleterious effects of abusive drinking were also assessed with respect to academic, physical and emotional harm. The resultant data may be used for social norming announcements or as assessment measures in determining the impact of the campaign via a longitudinal study.

The SAUP was deemed face valid by the Task Force on Binge and Abusive Drinking, which includes faculty from educational leadership and educational psychology. The items measure only what they purport to measure without regard to any underlying construct. The sole purpose of the SAUP is to provide descriptive measures from which the information is used in a practical assessment manner. For this purpose, there is no constellation of items that would correlate in a manner consistent with content validity. The items were designed to target the specific types of information that social norming campaigns with proven successes have used in similar campaigns. A pilot review by The University of Mississippi Task Force, Assistant Director for Institutional Research, and students revealed no conceptual difficulties in interpreting and responding to the items.

The SAUP contains a brief introductory statement followed by 16 questions and four demographic items. The introduction to the SAUP reads as follows:

> Thank you for taking the time to respond to the survey. Your honest responses to the items will help Ole Miss [i.e., The University of Mississippi] Faculty and Staff in maintaining a safe and healthy environment conducive to the pursuit of your academic goals. Please respond to the items by writing a number in the boxes and darkening the

ovals accordingly [the SAUP responses are scanned]. Note the word "drink" refers to any type of alcoholic beverage (for example beer, wine, liquor, etc.).

The 16 questions are:

1. How many drinks do you believe the average Ole Miss student consumes every week?
2. On average, how many drinks do you consume every week?
3. On average, how many drinks did you consume every week in high school?
4. How many days per week do you believe the average Ole Miss student consumes alcohol?
5. On average, how many days per week do you consume alcohol?
6. On average, how many days per week did you consume alcohol in high school?
7. How many days per month do you believe the average Ole Miss student consumes five or more drinks in a 2-hour period?
8. On average, how many days per month do you consume five or more drinks in a 2-hour period?
9. What percentage of Ole Miss students do you believe feel it is important that their friends consume alcohol?
10. What percentage of Ole Miss students do you believe feel that the consumption of alcohol is an important part of their college experience?
11. What percentage of Ole Miss students do you believe have been hurt academically due to the consumption of alcohol?
12. What percentage of Ole Miss students do you believe have been hurt physically or emotionally due to the consumption of alcohol?
13. Do you feel it is important that your friends consume alcohol?
14. Do you feel that the consumption of alcohol is an important part of your college experience?
15. Have you been hurt academically due to the consumption of alcohol?
16. Have you been hurt physically or emotionally due to the consumption of alcohol?

The four demographic items are:

17. Gender: Male/Female
18. Age: Under 18/18-20/21 and Over
19. Academic Status: Freshmen/Sophomore/Junior/Senior/Grad Student
20. Member of campus Greek fraternity or sorority: Yes/No

Questions 3 and 6 are used to determine any significant changes in usage since arriving at college. The demographic items are used to identify group differences that may suggest different publicity strategies. The remaining 14 questions may be used to develop social norming announcements that accurately represent the data in a manner that minimizes the importance of alcohol usage. Select items also provide insight into the effectiveness of the social norming campaign via longitudinal research. Contrasts between actual behaviors/feelings and perceptions are seen in the following question pairs: (a) 1 and 2; (b) 4 and 5; (c) 7 and 8; (d) 9 and 13; (e) 10 and 14; (f) 11 and 15; and (g) 12 and 16.

DATA ACQUISITION

In order to generalize the results of survey to the entire campus population, the data should be acquired from a representative sample of the campus population using acceptable confidence levels and intervals (cf. UCLA). Randomization is the preferred method of generating such a representative sample because it provides the relevant stratification of groups. Although not a truly random sample, randomly selected classes (i.e., cluster sampling) can also be used to collect data; however, the class sizes should be small in comparison to the desired sample size so that no single class significantly distorts the demography of the acquired data.

To reduce bias due to readability, the SAUP should be piloted on an ethnically representative sample of students and the respondents queried on their level of understanding each item. This will help to ensure that the SAUP is assessing alcohol usage and perceptions rather than English proficiency.

Another form of bias can occur if respondents, knowingly or unknowingly, provide inaccurate descriptions of themselves. This is particularly inherent in self-report instrumentation. However, Wechsler et al. (1998) cite research indicating that the use of self-report instruments is a valid approach for data acquisition with respect to both alcohol and tobacco related surveys.

DATA USAGE

After the data are acquired, the question pairs will suggest different announcements. Using the examples presented, analogous advertisements may be developed for other question pairs. The examples provided are fictitious (as is the University of Z) and do not reflect the data acquired at The University of Mississippi. Questions may be modified accordingly to reflect the actual institution being surveyed (e.g., substitute "Ole Miss" with "UZ").

Example 1. Assume that the average response for question 1 is 10.7 and for question 2 is 2.8; thus, a potential announcement is:

> *Students at The University of Z* ***believe*** *that the average UZ student consumes almost 11 alcoholic drinks every week.*
>
> ***In actuality****, the average UZ student consumes less than 3 alcoholic drinks every week.*

This announcement is designed to highlight the discrepancy between actual and perceived levels of usage.

Example 2. Assume that the data for question 1 indicate that 70% of the students drink 0-3 drinks every week. A potential announcement is:

The majority of UZ students consume 0-3 alcoholic drinks every week.

This announcement is designed to highlight the low alcohol usage among a majority of students.

Example 3. Assume that the data for question 13 indicate that 10% of the students feel it is important that their friends consume alcohol. A potential announcement is:

> *90% of UZ students do not feel it is important that their friends consume alcohol.*

This announcement is designed to highlight a lack of peer pressure to consume alcohol.

In a social norming campaign, an important consideration is to use the data in a manner that promotes a minimization of the importance of alcohol usage. If the University of Z has an enrollment of 20,000, then from example 3 we might state that 2000 students (10% of 20,000) believe it is important that their friends consume alcohol, or from example 2 we might state that 6,000 students (30% of 20,000) drink 4 or more drinks every week; however, neither of these statements minimizes the importance of alcohol usage. Therefore, it is vitally important that the data are presented in a fashion that helps students to understand what constitutes majority behavior, which typically is a lower usage of alcohol than initially perceived.

CONCLUSION

Social norming campaigns have proven to be an effective method of reducing alcohol abuses on college campuses where such campaigns are built upon research that measures actual and perceived levels of usage. The *Survey of Alcohol Usage and Perceptions* was developed as an effective and efficient instrument to gather data at The University of Mississippi as part of our social norming campaign. Other institutions, with minor modifications, can use the SAUP as the foundation for campaigns to reduce the student consumption of alcohol bearing in mind that the manner in which collected data are presented is of paramount importance to the success of any social norming campaign.

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